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The Future for Victims of Violence: Will VAWA Be Renewed?

By Jamie Friye

The American Bar Association reports that about 4 million American women each year experience an assault by an intimate partner, and that one in three women experiences at least one physical assault by a partner during adulthood. Additionally, one in eight U.S. women are victims of rape, and Federal Bureau of Investigation statistics reveal that one in three women will be sexually assaulted during her lifetime.

Because of the Violence Against Women Act, a broad range of services now exists to provide aid to women in the aftermath of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, rape, incest and stalking. The act was originally passed in 1994 and reauthorized and enhanced in 2000, and a total of \$1.6 billion was authorized to fund it. Of those funds, \$925 million was authorized for grants to be allocated according to state population, with each state guaranteed a base amount of \$600,000 per year.

The VAWA is due to expire in September unless it is reauthorized again. If the act is not renewed, many programs, such as community-based agencies that establish specialized domestic violence and sexual assault units to assist victims of violence, may be cut.

According to the National Organization for Women, although public attention to this issue and services to victims have improved since the act's passage, much still remains to be done to combat and prevent violence against women. Due to budget deficits and program rollbacks, VAWA's advocates will face an uphill battle to win support for legislation that will call for more funds and expanded services and attention to these issues.

NOW not only urges that the act be renewed, but that it also must be expanded to include the following: 1) giving violence survivors reasonable unpaid leave from work to address the situation, unemployment coverage if they can't continue working or are released from their

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jobs, and protection from job discrimination; 2) expanding the options for survivors of domestic violence who need transitional housing; 3) prevention and intervention programs targeted at children and youth, and including minors in all programs and services; 4) improving the training and education of health care providers to improve medical services; 5) extending its outreach to communities to ensure that everyone has access to prevention strategies and to vital protective and recuperative services.

Although women's rights advocates laud VAWA for its accomplishments and would like to see it renewed and expanded, it is not without its opponents. The Independent Women's Forum, for example, has frequently accused battered women's advocates of using incorrect statistics and misleading the public about the prevalence and severity of domestic violence, according to the Family Violence Prevention Fund. IWF leaders and members often claim that women are the perpetrators of domestic violence at least as frequently as men. Former IWF President Anita K. Blair said in 2000 that the VAWA "is not helpful and, in fact, often harms individuals and families caught in violent relationships." She said VAWA funds programs that "remain unproven and may make dangerous situations worse."